

Testimony of Yvonne Stratford
Leader of Low Income Families Fighting Together

Presented to the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Community
Opportunity

United States House of Representatives

June 21, 2007

Thank you Chairwoman Waters, Ranking Member Biggert and members of the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity for inviting me to testify today on the HOPE VI program.

My name is Yvonne Stratford. I have lived in public housing in Miami for 20 years. I lived in Scott Homes/Carver Homes for 5 ½ years before Miami-Dade Housing Agency got a HOPE VI grant to redevelop Scott Homes/Carver Homes.

I am a leader of Low Income Families Fighting Together (LIFFT), which is a grass roots membership organization with many members who used to live in Scott Homes. We have been fighting to help the former Scott Homes residents to change the project so it can be utilized by the residents and to help the displaced residents get back into housing.

I and all of my neighbors were displaced from Scott Homes in 2002 and 2003 to make way for the HOPE VI redevelopment. We were told that the HOPE VI was to help the residents but the original plan only replaced 80 of the original 850 public housing units. And the Housing Authority was imposing a number of new requirements for all the replacement units. We knew that the redevelopment plan was not for us.

We were all told that we had a choice between other public housing units and a Section 8 voucher. I had heard that there were problems using the vouchers but most of my neighbors - and many members of LIFFT - believed the Housing Agency when they said that they could move anywhere with the vouchers. So most families chose the Section 8 vouchers.

About two years after the move we started hearing from Scott residents that they were losing their vouchers and losing their housing. For the past year LIFFT has been trying to locate all of the former Scott residents to help them return to housing. What we have found is horrific.

Over 600 hundred of the relocated families were "lost" and no longer receiving housing assistance from the County. I am attaching a December 2006 Miami Herald article describing how more than half of 1,178 families who moved out of Scott Homes/Carver Homes were unaccounted for by 2006. These were the families the HOPE VI project was supposed to help.

We located many of these families by putting up a “Find Our People Wall” on the site which asked missing families to come and sign the wall. We located several hundred of the missing families this way.

Many of these families had lost their vouchers and were homeless. Ms. B., a LIFFT member, lost her Section 8 voucher shortly after relocating due to confusion regarding an appointment. Unable to find an affordable place to live, Ms. B and her three children — one of which is severely disabled— were homeless for two years. Ms. B kept her family off the streets only by doubling up in the already overcrowded homes of friends and family, often sleeping on the floor and relocating every few weeks.

Another family, the D family, also LIFFT members, received separate vouchers upon leaving Scott Homes. Within two years they lost their voucher when their unit failed unit inspection and they were unable to find a new unit. They were homeless and forced to live with family and friends.

A third family lost its voucher because the woman missed an appointment because she was in the hospital. A fourth family lost its voucher because she moved without notice when her house was broken into and her daughter was raped.

These stories were repeated dozens of times. Families that had lived for many years in public housing with no problems lost their Section 8 vouchers after a brief period and were forced to live with relatives or in shelters. There were many reasons for this but they all related to the difficulty in using a Section 8 voucher. For example, when a unit failed inspection, the family was often unable to find a new unit within the voucher time period. Other families, when they had to move from their new home, did not have the funds to pay a security deposit for the next unit. While the housing agency provided a security deposit to find the first dwelling, no assistance was provided for the second. And the initial landlords often refused to return the initial security deposit to the tenants or delayed that return for months. Thus, relocated families with incomes ranging around \$9,000 - \$10,000 a year were forced to find a security deposit of \$1500 - \$2000 dollars. Tenants who were unable to lease up a new dwelling within the Section 8 voucher time limits lost their vouchers.

We believe that the HOPE VI law should require the Housing Authority to rebuild as many public housing as they tear down and to allow all the former residents to return without new rules.

It would be best if replacement housing was built before housing is torn down and residents are moved away so that families would not get lost while they are waiting for the replacement to get built.

It is very difficult to find affordable housing in Miami. The last time they opened the waiting list over 40,000 people applied in a few days.

Recently LIFFT has been working with the new Miami-Dade Housing Agency management to assist the former Scott residents who have lost their housing assistance to get them back into public housing or have their Section 8 vouchers reinstated. The Housing Agency has also committed to revisiting the Scott Homes HOPE VI plan and rebuilding on a one-for-one basis the 850 Scott Homes units demolished in 2001.

We are beginning to be hopeful but we believe the HOPE VI needs major changes if it is to be a valuable resource for everyone in the community, including public housing residents.

Thank you again for inviting me to share my HOPE VI experiences with you.

The Miami Herald

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2006

MIAMI-DADE HOUSING AGENCY

612 families on housing list missing

■ The troubled Miami-Dade Housing Agency is asking for help from private and public entities to find missing families it had promised to house.

BY CHARLES RABIN
crabin@MiamiHerald.com

The Miami-Dade Housing Agency has lost track of more than half the families who were promised new homes when the county demolished their Liberty City public housing almost six years ago.

According to a memo released by housing czar Cynthia Curry, the county has no idea where to find 612 of the 1,178 families who were moved out of the Scott-Carver projects.

Curry blamed contractor H.J. Russell & Co. for inadequately monitoring the families despite being paid almost \$1 million. The Atlanta-based firm — which has denied any wrongdoing — was let go shortly after an inspector

general's report criticized the company for the same reason. Monitoring is now done through the county's Department of Human Services.

"We're not relying on their information anymore," Curry said. "It's as if we're starting over again. It's the only way we can have confidence."

Advocates for affordable housing, such as Florida Legal Services and the Miami Workers Center, say some of Miami-Dade's neediest residents have fallen through the cracks of the county's massive bureaucracy.

"They've lost the people they're supposed to help. They don't know where they are," said Charles Elsesser of Florida Legal Services. "Those people are homeless. Their families are split up. That's the reality."

The troubled Housing Agency — which critics say

reeked of mismanagement and had little to show for millions of dollars spent planning affordable homes — will try to locate the missing families with help from the county's school system, community organizations, homeless shelters and activist groups.

"We don't have a choice," Curry said.

HOPE VI — the redevelopment project — was supposed to temporarily relocate 1,178 families with housing vouchers, then build affordable homes for them to purchase later.

As county officials gleefully watched in early 2001, bulldozers began to tear down the barracks-like, crime-infested Liberty City structures where the families lived along Northwest 22nd Avenue.

Each family was then given a voucher that would have paid for them to move into other public housing, or paid 70 percent toward a private rental unit up to a certain amount.

But six years later, only three of the planned 411 affordable homes have been built. The Housing

'The whole premise of HOPE VI was it was going to uplift people.'

— TONY ROMANO,

Miami Workers Center organizing director

Agency has squandered much of the \$5 million it received from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to keep track of the families, critics say.

"The whole premise of HOPE VI was it was going to uplift people," said Tony Romano, the organizing director of the Miami Workers Center.

Instead of putting up houses, the Housing Agency spent millions of dollars on architects and project managers, high overhead costs and payments to a consultant who double-billed the county, according to a Miami Herald investigative series in July. After The Miami Herald series was published, several of the agency's top managers were replaced and Curry was brought in to clean up the program.

Along the way, the county lost contact with hundreds of Scott-Carver families — many for reasons that are not clear. Grisel Rodriguez, a Housing Agency management assistance team member, said her agency is beginning the task of contacting 515 of the relocated families that are still listed as using county social services.

In the summer, The Miami Herald traced 250 of the displaced families and found that more than a third no longer lived at the addresses the Housing Agency considered current. Some are simply gone, with no forwarding addresses.

Romano said the Miami Workers Center has found 28 of the missing residents and passed the information to the Housing Agency.

Curry's two-page report was in response to a request from County Commissioner Dorrin Rolle, whose district includes Liberty City. Rolle is expected to address the findings at a committee meeting this afternoon.

Habitat for Humanity is building 52 homes that are expected to be completed by late 2007, Curry said.

"It's moving. They're active, visible," she said.

Miami Herald staff writer Debbie Cenziper contributed to this report.